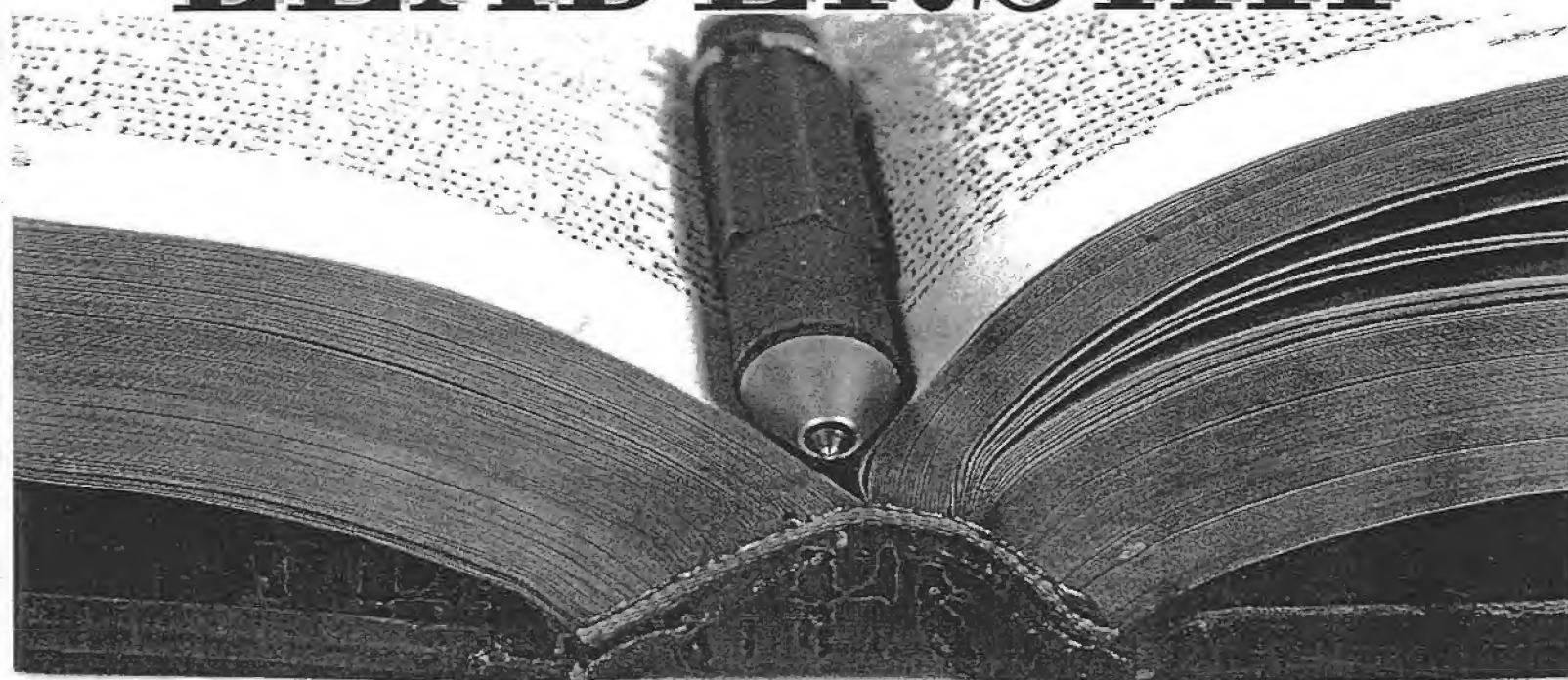


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Grammar and Teaching ESL

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The variety of theories relating to teaching ESL learners leads to contradictory ideas about teaching a second language. This paper focuses on the continuing importance of grammar in teaching and the current resurgence in interest in returning to grammar as an important component in the classroom.

Too often, when the breach between theory and practice is too wide, teachers "faced with the need to survive in the classroom...rejected their technical knowledge and instead relied on their practical knowledge" (Ellis, 41). This is regrettable, as both parties involved are deprived of valuable resources, and students suffer as a result. In practice, the situation is not so dire, for "teachers do make use of technical knowledge in planning lessons, choosing and writing materials and tests, and deciding what methodological procedures to utilize" (Ellis, 41).

The body of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research over the past half century has created a wealth of information about how people learn a second language (Ellis, 40). Ellis characterizes terms such as "overgeneralization, transfer errors, fossilization, order and sequence of acquisition and input and intake" as products generated for the classroom through research (Ellis, 40). In the area of grammar, we will explore ways that research has informed teaching and created new approaches to teaching grammar.

One significant question raised over the past decades in second language teaching is whether grammar should be taught at all. "During the past 25 years (1991) we have seen grammar move from a position of central importance in language teaching, to pariah status, and back to a position of renewed importance" (Celce-Murcia, 476). However, grammar's return to a place of importance does not signal a return to grammar-centered teaching or the outmoded grammar-translation technique. Instead, grammar is beginning to assume a position directed toward the

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Historically, varied language teaching methodologies reveal significantly different approaches to grammar. In the audio-lingual approach, grammar was presented in structures arranged from simple to complex, and acquisition was assumed to occur as a result of repetition and habit formation. Direct grammar teaching was avoided, because the practitioners of this method assumed rote learning would lead to correct grammar use. Despite the persistence of this type of teaching, this method fell into disfavor among scholars. The one redeemable practice from the Audio Language Method (ALM) could be the judicious use of drill. Rather than rejecting drill altogether, the classroom teacher can use it in certain instances. For example, a drill focusing on object pronouns might be initiated by the teacher in "game" format. This is a significant difference from the use of drill employed in the traditional audio-lingual approach and is an example of integrating useful techniques with old methods.

Many variables should be considered when making the decision about grammar instruction, and the learner is most important. Learner variables include learning style, age, proficiency level, and educational background, as well as affective factors. Learning styles as defined by auditory, visual, kinesthetic, and mixed learning styles could be addressed by introducing grammatical structures through written exercises, dictation, oral drill, and elicited spontaneous production.

Age is an important determinant in targeting structure. "If the ESL learners concerned are young children, it is most likely that little explicit grammar instruction is needed" (Celce-Murcia, 463). On the other end of the scale, it seems likely that older students welcome the opportunity to use analytical strategies in the form of talk about grammar rules. Adult students being taught by the teachers are eager to have codified rules presented at times, despite the teacher's own preference for presenting rules for inductive analysis (Borg, 21-24). In our experiences with adult learners, we have found that these learners expect a certain amount of presentations of definitions, declensions, and rules in order to feel a sense of accomplishment. Celce-Murcia analyzes this phenomenon neatly when she says, "Even...preliterate or semiliterate adults...may demand some grammar because of cultural expectations regarding what constitutes language instruction" (463). Our experiences and observations bear out the truth of this assertion.

Proficiency level and educational background also are determinants in making decisions about how to teach grammar. Although the negative effects of the L1 in transference to the target language has been well documented, there is also evidence that learner proficiency and advanced academic status in the L1 can help the learner when it is necessary to make analytical, deductive observations.

Most importantly, learners' needs and expectations should serve as part of teachers' decision-making for the classroom. There should be a marked difference in the activities planned for a classroom of individuals needing communicative fluency in the workplace and social setting versus academics needing to communicate verbally and

by written language in their chosen field (Celce-Murcia, 462).

Corpus linguistics is a field that has developed from the descriptive approach to grammar and the language. The advent of the computer age has made it possible for extremely large bodies of language to be described, sorted, and analyzed. Although these studies of the language stand on the shoulders on traditional grammar with its eight parts of speech, clauses and phrases, the studies provide a departure point for more sophisticated grammatical descriptions of the language. The new technology allows the researcher to study the differences in actual language as to social register, academic writing, conversational speech, formal speech, and other categories that describe how language is used in specific situations. The rules and usages that are revealed provide guidelines for teachers to prepare lessons according to their students' needs. "Corpus based research has consistently shown that grammatical patterns differ systematically across varieties of English...important differences also occur across varieties within standard English" (Conrad, 549). Conrad further notes that it is not possible "to make global generalizations about the use of a particular grammatical structure in English" (549-550). This new information

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serves to update traditional grammar textbooks. The importance of this emerging corpus research is "because teachers cannot cover everything in an ESL grammar class, principled decisions about content are crucial" (Conrad, 557). With the constraints of time, learner variability, and the goal of fluency, both oral and written, teachers have to make informed decisions about the scope of their day-to-day lessons. Using corpus studies may be a way to significantly improve lesson planning (Conrad, 558-560).

The problem with academia-generated research involves the often-present distancing from the working classroom. Researchers must develop symbiotic relationships with teachers working in the field and increase the active role of the teacher in research in order to help the ESL classroom teacher with lesson planning and utilization of emerging research findings. Although types of research such as theoretical-pedagogical research, action research, and participatory research methods have a place in the field, action research, as defined by Ellis, "teachers take responsibility for identifying their own research questions and conducting their own investigations" (57) is emerging as the research methodology of choice for informing classroom-teaching practices of ESL teachers. At its most informal, this research method is characterized by

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reflective teaching practices whereby the teacher problem solves on a daily basis. The more formal approach would be accomplished by the teacher setting up criteria to evaluate the relative success of different approaches to delivering information about a given grammatical structure (Borg, 30-35).

Borg's study of a teacher in the classroom, although rigidly conducted, provided valuable information about the successful strategies the teacher employed in teaching grammar as well as insight into the pedagogical belief system that underpinned the teacher's practices (9-35). Borg notes that "the stimulating portraits of L2 classroom practice that emerge from studies like this one can also be used in professional development (32). Borg goes on to say:

In conclusion, studies of the pedagogical systems on which teachers base grammar instruction have much to offer the field of L2 teaching. Such research can contribute much-needed descriptive data about what teachers actually do in teaching grammar...it can...serve as a catalyst in enabling teachers to examine their own grammar teaching practices; and it can contribute to the development of more sophisticated conceptualizations of L2 grammar teaching...(32).

Designing and testing a grammar-oriented approach to teaching ESL should be the province of researchers. One such approach, dubbed the EEE method by its creator, displays the possibilities of field-based research (Sysoyev). This study presents a theory, implements the theory in the classroom, and then uses both empirical observations and a feedback questionnaire completed by the students to arrive at conclusions concerning the efficacy of the method (Sysoyev). The first element of the method is exploration, by which students are challenged to find the common pattern in a set of structures. In other words, students are asked to induce the grammar rule. In the second or

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explanation stage, the teacher focuses on the discovered form and -*helps the students with rule codification. The final stage, expression, concentrates on meaningful utterances using the targeted structure (Sysoyev). The results yielded improved facilitation of language learning as well as satisfaction on the part of the students with their progress. Research of this type is the most likely candidate for producing research that can be immediately applied in the classroom. Furthermore, it serves as an example of research and pedagogy working synchronously.

The progress and development of new methodologies has certainly benefited the discipline of second language teaching. Each new innovation in the field has furthered the effectiveness of teaching techniques. Ongoing

research has informed, shaped, and inspired a myriad of teaching practices. There is little expectation that there will be a return to rigidly taught grammar rules divorced from production and authentic language. However, the experiments and methodologies have affirmed the importance of grammar teaching and the inseparability of grammar from the language as a whole. The task is to identify methods of incorporating the teaching of grammar in a congruent way with language acquisition. By using research knowledgeably and bridging the gap between the theorists and the practitioners, both teachers and student will achieve increased benefits and gains in the classroom.

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